THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH'S MISSION: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS

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With regard to the Reformed tradition, many complain that as a result of the neglect of the teaching of the Holy Spirit and of his work not much attention has been given to missionary efforts and conscience. Myung Yong Kim is merely an example. He writes, “The eclipse of pneumatology in Reformed doctrine leads Reformed churches to ignore the work of the Holy Spirit. The result is the danger of a rigid church, with no mission and no diakonia.”¹ Myung makes a correct assertion that mission is an aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit; thus missiology, in the Reformed tradition, generally falls into the locus of pneumatology. However, whether the claim of the neglect of pneumatology is justifiable is a totally different matter.

It may be true that the study of the Reformed theology regarding mission has never received due attention in the past due to the generally negative view of so many historians in the past concerning the Reformers—and thus their immediate successors—with respect to missions and evangelism. The claim of Gustav Warneck, a Protestant missiologist, exemplifies this negative sentiment:

We miss in the Reformers not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this not only because the newly discovered heathen world across the sea lay almost wholly beyond the range of their vision, though that reason had some weight, but because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction.²

Donald MacGavran, a former professor at the Fuller School of World Missions, also complains about the “silence” of the Protestant creeds

regarding “the missionary function of the Holy Spirit” and states that “the Protestant churches had practically no missionary conscience at all.”

As the interest of research on the Reformation period grows, an increasing number of scholars find that the negative judgment of Reformers with respect to missions is more untenable. With respect to the critique specifically aimed at the Reformed confessions, especially MacGavran’s claim, Robert Recker, Fred H. Klooster, and Anthony A. Hoekema each argue from the perspective of the Belgic Confession (hereinafter bc), Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort respectively that the Reformed confessions are not deficient in missionary conscience. All three maintain that what could be considered as lacking in the confessions with regard to missions is the modern idea or concept of mission with its emphasis on foreign mission, but not the fundamental and biblical theology of mission.

In light of the status quaestionis presented above, a careful study of the major Reformed confessional documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—as historical and textual expressions of what the Reformed orthodoxy taught and believed—is of paramount importance for understanding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in its relation to the church mission within the Reformed tradition. No doubt Richard Muller’s contribution to the flourishing interest in the study of Reformed orthodoxy has helped raise interests in the study of the Reformed historic confessional documents such as found in this article.

As this article will demonstrate, a proper reading of the confessions shows that the confessions do not lack in passion for evangelism when evangelism is understood as the propagation of the gospel of salvation and the church’s evangelistic mission as the mission of the church in propagating and proclaiming the gospel.

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